“Oh, My!”
Dr. Robert Bardeen
Ward Parkway Presbyterian
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I must begin by explaining my sermon title: “Oh, My!”

Please say it with me: “Oh, my!” Say it again: “Oh, my!” During my sermons on the Book of Revelation, I give you permission to say “Oh, my,” any time you so desire.

Let me explain.

Dr. Karl Barth (1886 – 1968), a Swiss pastor and theologian, wrote the massive *Church Dogmatics* (14 volumes, 9,233 pages, 6 million words, published from 1932 to 1967) that is widely considered one of the most important works of the 20th century. Pope Pius XII said Karl Barth was the best theologian since St. Thomas Aquinas. Barth worked with Dietrich Bonhoeffer to write the Barman Declaration of Faith. His commentary on Romans (1918) changed the thinking of many Christians about the value and power of scripture.

Before I introduce Barth’s very helpful thought about the Book of Revelation, I have two stories about him. These stories are 46 years between each other.

In the summer of 1916, Barth and a fellow pastor met for coffee in Basel, Switzerland. Both were discouraged. World War I had just started two years before. His friend said, “I think I’m going leave the ministry and follow a young man from Austria who is fighting for the Germans. Born in 1889, he is becoming very popular. His name is Adolf Hitler.” Barth, who tells this story in the preface of his Romans commentary, answered, “I am not leaving the ministry because I want to study scriptures, write a commentary on Romans, and follow Jesus Christ.”

During 1962, Barth made his only visit to America and lectured at several places including Princeton Seminary and Rockefeller Chapel at University of Chicago. During the Q & A time in Chicago, a student asked Barth to summarize his whole life’s work in a sentence. Barth answered by singing in Swiss German *Jesus Loves Me This I Know*, and then in English. He said, “My grandmother taught me this song long ago when I sat on her lap, and I still hold it in my heart.”

Now, listen to Barth’s thinking about the Book of Revelation. He believes there are many times when we need to suspend our logic and just say, “Oh, my!” He doesn’t think we should give up thinking, but instead realize that we can’t understand all of the pictures and colors and symbols and monsters and numbers and allusions. We need to say, “Oh, my,” often, and enjoy
the moment and remain convicted that God is in control and be resolved that in the end God will have the victory.

“Oh, my!” Please feel free to say it any time you so desire. “Oh, my” will help for our wild ride during the next six Sundays.

Are you ready? Say it again: “Oh, my.”

Here we go.

Revelation 1:1-20 NIV

1 The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Let’s first answer the basic questions about the last book of the Bible.

What is the source of the revelation? It is from Jesus Christ, given to him by God.

Why? The revelation will show God’s servants what will take place in the future.

Who received the revelation? John, the servant of God, received the revelation. I believe this John is the last apostle alive, and he is not John the Elder that scholars have proposed. I believe John received the revelation and wrote it down before 70 AD, the year Jerusalem went into ruins by the Roman Empire. I know that position disagrees with other Bible scholars who date the Book of Revelation at 96 AD. Here’s my position: I think all of the New Testament was written before the fall of the temple. The destruction of the temple was so dramatic that I think all of the New Testament books would have mentioned it if they were written after 70 AD.

Who told John? An angel served as the messenger.

What did John see? He saw the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. This last book of the Bible is God’s Word and it places Christ in the center.

3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

How can we receive a blessing? By reading the entire book out loud! And truly hear it and take to heart what is written. We can fulfill the two out of three during the next six Sundays, but it’s not enough enough time for me to read the entire book out loud. However, if you so desire, you can read the parts we can’t cover on Sundays.
In North Carolina during 2016 & 2017, I taught the Book of Revelation three times: once in a Sunday school class and twice during the summer (10am class and the same lesson at 7pm). We read every word out loud. It was a blessing to hear all of it read out loud.

4 John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Who received the Book of Revelation? The seven churches in Minor Asia. We will hear more about them next Sunday when we review the seven letters to the seven churches.

Who gives grace and peace? God does. In verse 4, God is described as the one who is and who was and who is to come. This is the first definition of God and the first picture of God in the revelation. The present, the alpha, and the omega – today, the beginning and the end.

What is the first use of numbers? Grace and peace comes from God, Jesus Christ, and the seven spirits before his throne. During this survey of Revelation, we will hear many numbers.

Who came up with the number seven? Either John did or God did!

You are going to have to decide now and keep up with your style of interpretation as we read further. Here’s my position: It’s God’s revelation and I think all of the pictures and symbols and colors and numbers are the Lord’s, and not John’s. I believe John was the scribe. He wrote down the revelation as best as he could. Sometimes he gets involved (like in chapter five when he weeps), but mostly he records what is in front of him, that is to say, what is revealed to him.

Therefore, I have come up with a mode of interpretation, first introduced to me by Rev. Earl Palmer (First Presbyterian, Berkley and University Presbyterian, Seattle). I think we need to have a lean interpretation of the Book of Revelation and not an extravagant interpretation.

What’s the difference, you might ask? The lean interpretation allows the text to speak for itself and the extravagant interpretation adds to the text your own personal perspective.

For example, I think Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* used extravagant interpretation throughout the book. He believed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was fulfillment of major prophecy. He thought the four major powers identified in Revelation are Russia, China, Egypt and the western alliance. He proclaimed that the Book of Revelation states the alliance of the Western European nations is a revived form the Roman Empire. He interpreted the ten horns and the ten kings, and he told who the antichrist will be.
Many have used extravagant interpretation methods to apply the Book of Revelation to their day. Some thought World War 1 was the beginning steps of the Second Coming of Christ. Others thought the bombing of Japan signaled the end of the world. George Orwell proposed 1984 and some thought it was true as 1983 ended. Prophets have come and gone. My first roommate at Seminary thought California was destined to break off in 1969 that would be the first sign of the Second Coming of Christ. Others think you can see about the 7 signs of the Second Coming of Christ. Some think our world is showing signs of the end of the world, and they use the symbols of Revelation to prove it.

It is your decision whether to use lean or extravagant means of interpretation. At the end of my sermon, I will share why I think lean interpretation allows us to get to the real message of revelation for the seven churches and for us today.

For this sermon series, I want you to relax. Allow the songs of Revelation to soothe you and calm you down. At the end of my sermon, I will share three helpful things to think about during our study.

Okay? “Oh, my!”

Let’s continue.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

7 “Look, he is coming with the clouds,”
   and “every eye will see him,
   even those who pierced him”;
   and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”
So shall it be! Amen.

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

It is always good to be reminded that God loves us. The first part of this section is like the Doxology. God loves us and died for us, and we praise God. We give glory to God for ever and ever.

Verse 7 is the first announcement of the second coming of Christ. I’m sure you have read about the second coming in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 17, and 1 Thessalonians, Paul’s first letter. The second coming of Christ is Christian doctrine. Every Sunday, we say it in the Apostles’ Creed: “...and thence he will come to judge the quick and the dead.” Judgment will part of the Second Coming.
“He is coming with the clouds” refers back to Jesus Christ ascending into the clouds after the resurrection (Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:6-11).

This section is closed with Alpha and Omega, along with the first definition of God – who is, who was, and who is to come. In this book we will be assured again and again that God is in control today, like God was in the past and like God will be in the future.

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Thank goodness John provides an historical footnote and location for this revelation.

“Your brother” means John is known to the seven churches. “Companion in the suffering” means the time period is the terrible reign of Caesar. Augustus died in 14 AD, and Nero took over as Caesar. He reigned until 68 AD. Some think Nero reached insanity because of his actions and policies, especially his brutal behavior. Most think Nero ordered the destruction of Jerusalem, but died before it happened. In the next two years, several Caesars came and went until Titus. Most think Titus actually administrated the destruction of the temple, and also the completion of the Colosseum in Rome where many Christians lost their lives in public display.

It was a terrible time to live.

John was on the island of Patmos when the vision came to him. Most think it was a Roman prison.

10 On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,
11 which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

On Sunday (the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week), John worshipped the Lord. The phrase “in the Spirit” has been discussed by many scholars. Was he asleep? Did John have a vision? It was certainly a spiritual experience. John will be “in the Spirit” for the entire revelation.

Of course, this is clear: he heard a loud voice like a trumpet. Many times trumpets will be used in this book.

The voice told John what to do, namely write what you see and send it.

See, write and send!

It is not John’s calling to see, interpret, figure out how to write down what he sees, or add an Old Testament interpretation on what he sees. Instead, John is instructed to look and record and give it to the seven churches.

Now, here comes a moment for “Oh, my.”
Are you ready?

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

That’s quite a sight! It’s like a painting.

The brush strokes paint a picture of Christ. Next Sunday, we will hear these descriptions again as we read chapters two and three. The seven golden lampstands, seven stars, First and Last, double-edged sword, blazing fire, seven spirits, and the word “Amen.”

“Amen” has been a part of singing for a long time. It’s the first song of Revelation.

Do you know this song?

Sing it over.
See the little baby
A-men.
Wrapped in a manger
A-men.
On Christmas morning

The movement of the central message of Revelation is carried by the 20 songs in the book. The narration of Revelation scares us sometimes, but the songs of Revelation give us hope and courage.

You already know many of the songs: Holy, Holy, Holy (chapter 4), Worthy is the Lamb (chapter 5) and the Halleluiah Chorus (chapter 20). Handel used the Book of Revelation, and so have many contemporary Christian composers like Hillsong, Amy Grant, and Chris Tomlin.

Who is in the middle of this picture? Jesus Christ is in the center – the son of man, the one of has the double-edged sword.
When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

John gets involved, falls at the feet of Christ, and is blessed by Christ who places his right hand on him. Christ identifies himself by the phrases: “I was dead and now alive”, and “I am alive for ever and ever.”

The gospel of Christ is clear: Christ died and rose again. Christ holds the keys of death and Hades (hell) which means there will be judgment.

The first chapter ends with some interpretation.

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The angel tells John to write what he sees and will see. John does not decide what things should look like according to traditional prophecy and images. He sees and it records what he sees.

The angel then solves two mysteries: the seven stars are the angels who will speak to churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Next Sunday, we will review those seven letters. Each letter is unique because the churches were unique. Some will be praised and some will not be praised.

Before we leave this first chapter, let’s make sure to name some helpful and encouraging things.

I have three helpful things.

1. **Allow the phrase “oh, my” to work into your thinking.**

You don’t have to figure out everything in Revelation. Your mind doesn’t have to answer all of the questions. Relax and allow the over-all teaching of Revelation to encourage you.

That’s why I select the 1 Thessalonians passage. After writing about the Second Coming of Christ, he concludes: “Therefore encourage on another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” The knowledge about the Second Coming should be an
encouraging word not a discouraging word. Put the front cover of the worship bulletin on your refrigerator and during the next six Sundays look at it often. Be encouraged.

2. **The Book of Revelation has direction, first to the seven churches, and second to the church throughout history.**

   Why?

   The book was given to them to help during the terrible times of the Roman Empire under Nero. They needed hope. They needed to hear that ultimately God is in control.

   But the teaching of the Second Coming of Christ is also for us, throughout history and into the future, until it actually happens. The prophets speak about it. Jesus taught about it. The Apostle Paul clearly instructed the early church about it. And John received the Revelation to speak first to the Christians under stress, and second to Christians throughout history.

3. **The basic message of Revelation is this: God is in control.**

   It’s the lean interpretation of Revelation, and is most certainly the most reliable one.

   Sometimes we wonder. Sometimes we go through temptations and trials, and honestly question the power of God in our lives.

   However, as we will learn from the fifth sermon in this sermon series, good and evil have been in battle throughout time, from Genesis to Jewish History to the cross of Christ to the middle ages to contemporary times to the future.

   But in the end, God will have the final victory. That’s why the last sermon is called the Halleluiah Chorus.

   Hallelujah!
   Salvation and glory and power belong to our God
   For true and just are his judgments.

   Let us pray.